

LOVE'S LABOR LOST

Online matchmaker still seeks love, money

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Gary Kremen founded the Web's most successful dating service, but he still hasn't found a date for Valentine's Day. ``It's really a bummer," Kremen said. ``I've helped a lot of people but it just hasn't helped me."

The Web site he started -- www.match.com -- has spawned more than 200 marriages, a dozen babies and countless dates. And it was just sold to a high-tech conglomerate for more than \$6 million.

But 34-year-old Kremen hasn't been able to capitalize much on the site's success romantically or financially. He's advertised on the site for years, but hasn't found the right woman. And he left Match.com before he could cash in on its sale.

Kremen is one of a new breed of workers in Silicon Valley: serial entrepreneurs, a class of high-tech gamblers who launch startup after startup hoping to hit it big. Kremen continues to hope he will hit the jackpot.

``I'm still gambling," he said. ``The lesson I've learned is what I do well and what I do not."

Kremen, a Chicago native, was one of the first Internet entrepreneurs. He launched his first business after graduating from Stanford Business School in 1989.

That was back when Internet access was rare, so Kremen and his roommate downloaded Unix software for free from the Internet and then repackaged and sold it.

``My roommate worked at Sun Microsystems and had a high-speed Internet connection," Kremen said. ``So at night he would download software."

Kremen headed the startup -- Los Altos Technology -- until investors replaced him with a new chief executive in 1993.

``I'm awesome at the beginning stage, but I'm like the world's worst manager of people," he said.

His next idea was to put classifieds online, so in November 1994 he convinced a few private investors to fund a company called Electric Classifieds.

Since Kremen placed a lot of personal ads in newspapers, he decided that they would be a good test for the online classifieds concept.

``I had observed that in the Bay Area personals there were many more men advertising than women," he said. ``So I realized two things -- you had to get gay men and women on the service."

He decided to build an upscale online meeting place that wouldn't feel like a meat market. It would emphasize privacy and de-emphasize photos.

``My belief is that people will feel comfortable if they can have an anonymous conversation before meeting in person," he said.

Match.com was born on April 21, 1995. Since then, it has quickly become the top meeting spot on the Web for older professionals who want long-term relationships. The service has signed up more than 500,000 singles and says it is currently registering 10,000 new members each week.

It costs \$9.95 per month or \$60 per year to belong to Match.com -- although many people just sign up for the seven-day free trial.

``It's one of the premiere sites -- if not the premiere site -- for matchmaking on the Internet," said Lisa Skirloff, author of a book on online dating, who met her boyfriend on Match.com.

But despite the site's success, Kremen ran into trouble with the venture capitalists. He left Match.com in March 1996 although he remains on the board of the parent company, Electric Classifieds, which is working on other online classifieds concepts.

When Kremen left, he handed the reins to Fran Maier, a veteran marketing manager who has run the company since.

Kremen went on to start a new venture: NetAngels, which makes Web software that analyzes users' actions and suggests Web sites to them. He left the company when it merged with Firefly Networks, a Boston software firm. Meanwhile, Match.com's success had attracted the interest of CUC International, a consumer services company that has been quietly buying up software firms in the past year.

In September, Kremen said, CUC paid Electric Classifieds more than \$6 million in cash for Match.com. CUC, which was later bought by Stamford, Conn.-based Cendant International, would not comment on the terms of the transaction.

Since the transaction was cash, it didn't do much to boost the value of Kremen's stock in Electric Classifieds.

``I didn't want to sell the crown jewel to invest it in the dog," he said. However, he said, he thinks the current management of Match.com will probably do a good job.

``It's hard to watch," he said. ``It was my baby. It took me some time to let go."

Now he's on to his next round of startups. Right now, he's funding a bunch of companies in a San Francisco incubator. But he's eagerly seeking a new passion -- in both love and work.

``I'm into my current ventures, but I'm not overwhelmed by a complete passion for them," he said. ``I'm looking for some new babies."

LOVE ONLINE

A sampling of the thousands of places to find a mate on the Web:

American Singles -- www.as.org

Animal Lover Personals -- www.animalpeople.com

Couple-Link -- www.couple-link.com

Cupid's Network -- www.cupidnet.com

Date Central -- www.datecentral.com

Matchmaker -- www.mm.org

Meet Me Online -- www.meetmeonline.com

One and Only Internet Personals -- www.one-and-only.com

Personals Online Network -- www.personalsnetwork.com

Rendezvous Dating Service -- www.vous.com

Singles Online -- www.singlesonline.com

WebMatch -- www.webmatch.com

SAFE CYBER COURTING

Some safety precautions (from Match.com):

- Read e-mails carefully, watching out for choppy sentences or stories with details edited out.
- Watch for passive language, frequent use of certain words (would, could, should and might) and statements that are written as questions. These can all indicate a lack of commitment.
- Remain anonymous. Don't tell someone your last name, real e-mail address, home address, phone number, or place of work until you have corresponded long enough to trust them.
- Stop communicating with anyone who pressures you for personal information.
- Beware of people who want to meet in person right away. Take time to decide if the person seems genuine.
- Meet in a busy public place. End the date in public as well.
- Never meet at home or work. Avoid hikes, bike rides, or drives for the first few dates.
- Take your own car or transportation. Bring enough money to get home on your own.
- Make sure you tell a friend or family member about your date. Agree to call them when you get home.
- If you are flying in from out of town, arrange for your own car and hotel room. Do not tell your date where you are staying.
- Make the first date short. Don't plan an entire day together.
- Look for red flag behavior such as bursts of anger, intense frustration or attempts to pressure or control you.
- Other red flags: passive-aggressive behavior, rude comments and inappropriate physical contact.
- If you're worried, call a friend or call the police. It's better to be safe than sorry.

Caption: Match.com founder Gary Kremen hopes to find his soul mate / BY TIM KAO/THE CHRONICLE